

The Unusual Francis A. Schaeffer

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Introduction

Even at this distance it is still difficult to put a label on Francis Schaeffer, though many people have tried. For instance, *Time* magazine called him "a missionary to intellectuals," while some Christians later saw him only as the founder of a community with an alternative lifestyle. Almost twenty years after his death in 1984 his writings are still read and continue to leave their mark on a second generation. He penetratingly exposed the ideas that have shaped our culture and revealed the truth of historic Christianity in relation to all areas of life. His work continues to rally believers from every tradition. At a time when Christians rarely made any significant contribution to public debates in the face of secularism, liberal theology, and widespread cynicism, Schaeffer built up their confidence, concern, and compassion.

With his wife and family, he opened his home and welcomed people from around the world to his table. These guests went to his home in a remote Swiss village in twos and threes, after hearing a lecture somewhere or through word of mouth. They were often amazed to find an educated person in such a setting. They could not easily classify him. He was knowledgeable about current philosophical and social thought and still believed the Bible to be God's revealed word. He spoke of art and theology, of law and culture, of justice and compassion from a historic biblical perspective. The real world at the end of the 20th century did not damage his Christian belief, but rather confirmed it. He spoke of spirituality in reasonable

terms, of truth with certainty, of faith on the basis of sufficient and coherent evidences. He prayed and saw God answer his prayer to enable him to reach his guests, who came from various backgrounds of existentialism, of the absurd, and of moral ambiguity and who were disillusioned with the 20th century experiments with fascism, communism, consumerism, and democracy.

Schaeffer treasured ideas and understood their power to inform, persuade, and to convict for better and for worse. He recognized the uniqueness and importance of biblical thinking for each Christian in all areas of culture. He was not satisfied to hold merely personal Christian convictions. "As a man thinks so is he" expressed for him the importance and the requirement of knowing the Bible in its details as well as in its fundamental and unique explanation of reality. Knowing the Bible was more than reciting verses. It involved first the study of what is said in the Bible about God and man, life and death, and work and worship. It also included the growing marvel of discovering the distinctive light the Bible sheds on human life and purpose. That light is incomparably brighter than what is taught in other religions or political theories. Schaeffer found in the Bible not so much a personal religion as the only possible way to explain the real world around us and real persons in it: creation and its form as well as the "mannishness" of significant personalities. Denominational particulars or religious language, which have become part of the Christian way of presenting itself to the outside

world, were to Schaeffer important only as cultural history. Schaeffer was less likely to hold certain “positions” than to explore the true truth of the Bible under the constant challenge of man’s need to understand the “What, Whence, Whither?” of human life in the real world.

Schaeffer lived, worked, and wrote during one of those watershed periods of history. The allied victory over fascist evil had bred a humanist confidence that looked forward to solving all human problems in the few years ahead. When that faith proved illusionary in light of Vietnam, racial tension, political assassinations, and governments that lied to the public, many people abandoned much of our heritage. Christianity, reason, meaning, and hope were abandoned as people increasingly turned to Eastern mysticism, drugs, and a pursuit of hedonistic short-term goals. They gave up the pursuit of truth and focused on momentary personal experiences. They replaced, in St. Paul’s words to the Ephesians, “sensitivity by sensuality.” This shift was not widely understood by a whole generation of Christians, who had little comprehension of the flow of ideas around them. They also had changed their focus increasingly to personal testimonies, opinions, and friendships. Under pressure from modernity, the arguments from a philosophy of science, politics, and economics, many Christians left the larger arena of life and withdrew into intellectual, spiritual, and cultural ghettos. Schaeffer was perhaps the first in his generation who once again showed that the gospel is not foolishness, that art and industry go together, that there is meaning to the human existence, and that we deal with persons, not statistics.

Schaeffer poured new foundations under a very fragmented society with his

demonstration of the real, coherent, and living answers of historic Christianity. He had started as a non-Christian young man outside the church and was exposed to the questions that Greek philosophers had raised and handed down unanswered to each subsequent society. Schaeffer found, in reading the Bible from cover to cover, a view of everything that met the criteria of reality. Not only were the same questions raised here, but also answered. Not only was there a set of answers, but they also tied together various mutually supportive pieces into a fabric that would clothe all of man in all areas of life and give color and warmth through a personal and infinite absolute. God’s real existence (“The God who is there” as well as “He is There and He is not silent”) is again established and shown to be also necessary to have anything true to say about man, morals, and meaning.

This contribution was made through the numerous books he authored (which are still in print and widely read), and through his public lectures and discussions around the world. Several days each week were taken up by personal conversations with individuals in his study or by mail. They were personal because he took a genuine interest in persons with their questions, doubts and insights, experiences and studies. Much of Schaeffer’s reflection on the truth came from these times. He always refused to give canned answers, for he was concerned about the needs of the other person. Schaeffer could listen and discuss, not just teach and direct. He had a genuine interest to know more for himself. He would then revel in the repeated discovery that the Bible was true to the real world in far wider areas than those limited by religious interests, spiritual searches, and private

concerns.

True Truth

Schaeffer's more than 25 books, three documentary films, and hundreds of taped lectures discuss many areas of biblical thinking. They treat history and art, sermons and social issues, exegesis and economics, the church and challenges from the environment, biblical texts and the spiritual life, apologetics and evangelism. They deal with the church and the state, with life and culture, with citizens and critical theory. Together they illustrate that Christianity speaks from a unified field of knowledge, which begins with the real existence of the living God as a person who thinks, feels, and acts. He alone exists from before the beginning, yet as a real person he made man male and female in his image. Eternal is the person of God Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He speaks in the Scripture through prophets and apostles about real truth. The Bible is not written in some spiritual language with mystical power about another world. God came in the flesh in Jesus at a historic time to offer forgiveness from sin and also hope of a repaired and resurrected life in history. There is a continuum from then to now, and from now to later.

For Schaeffer this was not a matter of Reformed, Arminian, or dispensational theological positions. Free from such labels, he was able to address people with insight that was not filtered first through certain expectations or formulations. He had found that the Bible gives man a coherent and verifiable view of God and man in time and space, in history. To Schaeffer the Bible was the explanation each man needs to understand the world he lives in. All other religions always take away from either the reality of the cosmos

or from being truly human. Schaeffer believed that you could not understand the real world without the Bible, but neither could you read the Bible and understand it without knowledge of the real world. He found no conflicts here. Instead he found the Bible's truth repeatedly confirmed in the discovery of what is real in our world. "There is only one reason to be a Christian," he would often say, "and that is that Christianity is the one truth of the universe."

The reference to truth was for Schaeffer more than a personal choice or commitment. Whoever is in search of real answers to the perennial questions of man does not have many choices between Christianity and any number of alternatives. Christianity is not just the best fitting or helpful mental model or construction. The Bible with its message, in contrast to other ways of viewing the world, is the only true truth. It was not a Christian view of things (as if there could be many others), but the only fitting explanation of man, history, and the cosmos in the context of all reality. Other views lacked that correspondence between what they proposed and the real world. They all fail to explain reality adequately.

Marxism could not be true since it denied the real existence of the thinking human being, of absolute morals, and of an overall meaning to the individual person. *Islam* could not be true since it identified Allah with everything that happens and thus did not have an answer for the moral dilemma around and in us. *Buddhism* could not be true since there was no way, in one's search of Nirvana, to call reality an illusion. *Relativism* did not answer the contradiction that, when stated as a proposition, it claimed to be an absolute description of the way things

are. *Mysticism* could not be true to the real world since it invites us to a world of “otherness” where thought forms and experiences cannot be tested with commonly known criteria, where good could be evil, where real could be imaginary, where healthy could lead to death. In such a world, induced by religion or drugs or ideology, we would be victims to circumstances beyond our critical discernment. *Paganism* with its assumption of one or several divinities in nature could not explain the contradictions between life and death, between intentions and experiences, between each person’s private divinity and the ensuing conflict of moral options.

Schaeffer understood that the Old and New Testament together address a unified field, where the text speaks in the context of creation, where word and fact come together, where ideas and propositions are always relevant to the basic need of man to understand life. God gave the book to man after the Fall. Only in the Bible does God come for lunch with Abraham. Only here does God become flesh and die as an atonement for our sins, to be raised again into a continuous life. Only in the Bible is language used that describes both God and man and is therefore accessible to anyone. This is the book that explains the life to which we are exposed. It explains, and Schaeffer always came back to this, how and why we find ourselves in our situation and what can be done about it.

The truth of biblical Christianity is also supported by the observation that the moral laws work together with the natural laws. The commands of God do not separate us from reality into a pious community of followers, but reveal to our mind what the nature of reality is like. Then the choice is ours. Faith does not give

shape to the world; faith is the response of the creature to sufficient evidence. We are asked to believe what the facts clearly show. For instance, there is really only one God whose existence sufficiently explains the real world and our existence as persons. Allah, Wotan, Zeus, or Buddha does not do that! Paganism makes us one with nature. Allah defies our moral sensibility. Buddha escapes into detachment from society, from life and from moral judgment. It is foolish to believe in any one of them as god. We should not invent other gods like these besides him, for they do not exist, nor do they explain our existence as persons.

In the same way we should not use God’s name to support our vanity, since truth should speak for itself. “Yes” and “no” should be enough. A referral to God to give credibility to a lie or falsehood is vain and does not get us anywhere. If we need to swear or call on God to support our case it is groundless to begin with.

Each of the moral commands speaks of the shape of the created order and exposes (and tries to prevent) our foolish imagination. The commands were given when sin increased from the idea that one could imagine a different world than the one created by God. There is no love of neighbor (or of God) when we accept murder, theft, adultery, gossip, and envy. There is no love of self if we treat every day and every event in the same way. None of these commands are religious in nature. They reestablish for us knowledge of the shape and workings of reality created by the God of the Bible.

Only in the Bible is the human person addressed, valued, and respected as a thinking, responsible individual. Here are the roots for a genuine humanism, i.e., a concern for the human being who,

having been made in the image of God, is now fallen and in need of God's reliable information about all of life and redemption. This includes an explanation of the mandate for man to live, work, and create. Only in the Bible do we have enough information to know that the world is no longer what God meant it to be. We now live after the fall of man. God is not found in every aspect of history. We live by his word, not by what we find in nature. Neither earth nor nature is our model. They are also in need of redemption.

The information of the Bible continues to reveal the work of God in history, his offer of salvation through the finished work of Christ from legal guilt now and from death as an effect of the Fall in the future resurrection. Reading the text requires a lively mind, a desire to comprehend, a questioning approach, and a memory to hold together the arguments for God. In the Bible human beings are not foremost a collective, a tribe, or blindly obedient performers. Moses, Jeremiah, Job, Habakkuk, Paul, and even Christ argue with God and are given respectful and comprehensible answers. We all are addressed with names and are honored by God as individuals: small, sinners, and in need of grace, but not ever as insignificant zeros. The rich young ruler could walk away from Christ without repentance, and Jesus looked on him and loved him.

Denying the modern notion that man is autonomous, a law unto himself, does not mean that man is subject to fate or natural law. He is not an animal or a stick of wood. Schaeffer affirmed a biblical humanism against any kind of religious or scientific determinism on one hand and against secular humanism, where man plays god, on the other.

For Schaeffer this plays an important

role in his understanding of the gap described between the character of God and the reality of a fallen world. The will of God and the tragic consequences of Adam's fall, which God did not and does not will, are not one and the same. This distance between God and history is unique to the Bible and calls for moral judgment of events, but not of God. For Schaeffer history is real and choices are significant. They lead to either rejoicing or sorrow in heaven. We praise or blame people for them. Schaeffer strongly believed that we do not live in a program or, as he called it, a closed system. There is no Christian, secular, or scientific determinism in Schaeffer's view.

In this he also resisted the tendency in many Reformed evangelical circles to adopt an almost Islamic view of the will of God. We pray in the Lord's Prayer that God's will be done on earth, because it is not yet being done here as it is being done in heaven. We all, male and female persons, have been made and given a mandate to create, to resist evil, to subdue, and to have dominion. Most of us are called to marriage and must create ourselves the relationship between husband and wife, parents and children. God has made us capable of having children, but he does not make them for us. We are called to have dominion, to give names to animals, to shape the garden, and to make the earth inhabitable. Even Mary was not forced to be the chosen virgin through whom the prophesied Messiah would take on flesh. When the angel announced the coming Lord she made up her mind and chose to be the handmaiden of the Lord.

Schaeffer was known for his ability and his willingness to discuss the Bible's content with anyone in any situation. The

continuity between it and creation, between God's word and man's need to know about all of life was the basis for his confidence, courage, and inquiry. The ability was nurtured by years of study with a continuous set of changing questions, concerns, and persons in mind. He did not start with a faith, but concluded that there are good and sufficient reasons to believe and to act on it. He did not see a challenge to that conclusion as a threat, but as an opportunity to discover again that the Bible is true, that God really exists, and that the promises are rooted in God's character. The text opens itself to the questions brought to it. Schaeffer's Bible is marked with numbers, references, connecting lines, and other relevant pieces. His sermons are pretty much all contained therein. It was the key to understanding life and the weapon to fight off ignorance, folly, and despair.

He told the story of the airport security guard who asked whether he had a weapon with him. He denied it. When she checked his carry-on and found his Bible, she said, much to his delight: "Well, but that is a weapon!"

Schaeffer's willingness to discuss the Bible was nurtured from his discovery and subsequent confidence in its truthfulness. It also came from his respect for and delight in people. When he looked at people, he did not see crowds, but individuals. He did not see "the needy," but individuals who needed answers to life's bewildering questions. To Schaeffer there were no little people, but only men and women made in the image of God. Schaeffer's delight in people did not mean that he could not get annoyed at times, but that he would not be shocked by questions or situations into which people had gotten themselves. They were to him real

people of flesh and blood, of curiosity and gifts, with more or less courage.

Schaeffer understood with sensitivity that there are good reasons in the world around us to not be a Christian. Without the Bible, reality is in many parts a great mess and confusion. If the world around us is what God has made or is satisfied with now, God either does not exist or is a monster. Only the Bible could give a more fitting explanation of reality and history, of the Creator and his battle for our restoration. Schaeffer always worked with the imperfect situation and was glad for what was still possible in a fallen world.

A Prophetic Voice for the Church

With all Schaeffer's efforts to welcome, teach, and help individuals, he was, as he would say from time to time, a church person. The church was to him the Bride of Christ, the Lord's creation from among his people. There were and will always be believers in the Church of Christ. The work among students and then a much wider public was not a substitute for a church. Through his teaching, speaking, and writing he aimed to feed people into the believing church. Schaeffer had no interest to make a name for himself, to start an institution, or to have a following. He resisted this with all his might. He wanted no community around him other than a community of ideas that bound people to the Lord Christ. He urged people to leave after their studies, to find and to commit themselves to a church that was orthodox in both teaching and practice.

The church should hold to the system of belief taught in the Bible about all of life. Culturally conditioned and relevant things should not be held up as new absolutes of quasi-biblical authority. At

the same time he strongly affirmed the need for a life of real community, of compassion, and of mercy and justice, in which the life described in the Bible would be attempted for the big person and the little one, the rich and poor, the artistic and the fearful across all the social distinctions in the midst of tribal societies that are divided by ethnicity, gender, or economic status.

One can easily imagine how appalled and saddened Schaeffer was when many churches became more interested in attracting people by any means than by speaking and living the truth. He clearly felt that God's work is never old fashioned or traditionalist. There is little value in old habits. But he lamented the various attempts to provide in the church the atmosphere of a circus, to focus on marketing strategies, and to make the criterion of numbers and size centrally important. He noticed how the mantra-like repetition of words and poor music in many churches today help dilute the content of its life and proclamation. It is at least a very weak and sad reflection, if not a counterfeit, of what is and should be the most glorious truth in the universe. Instead of recognizing the root cause of diminishing interest in Christianity in the Church's insufficient answers to moral and intellectual problems, churches countered with multiple distractions, outward sensual attractions that offer more fun, liveliness, and happenings. The church began to compete with television (not merely using it as a tool) and theme parks and thereby making its own contribution to the escape from reality instead of resisting it. Catering more to the desires and expectations of the crowds than to the needs of people, many churches contributed to the marginalization of Christianity

even as more and more people attended church functions. Churches have grown in size, but they have also shrunk in significance. Few people who are in government, law, business, or the whole range of practical life expect Christians to weigh in with substance, wisdom, and compassion.

Likewise, few Christians know that the truth of God's word also needs to be applied to their community work, their voting privileges, and their teaching (whether in secular or Christian schools). Christians are no longer feared, but more readily tolerated, sometimes ridiculed and always labeled. We have separated out from others and thereby protected our hide, but we have also broken off our relations to our neighbor except in very personal ways.

In the past the yeast of the gospel made the whole loaf rise. Today it is kept in a cooler and never allowed to cause trouble, sow doubt, and reach out to the world with the truth about much more than personal salvation. Without it being readily available and discernible, the world seeks substitutes in hideous vice, tragic escapes, and false and unreliable commitments.

Churches often furnish more amusement to the faithful than a prophetic challenge to the world. They give an ear to the mediocre and create a separate culture of the overly cheerful, or lonely and depressed. Schaeffer wrote of this disastrous decline in content and life in his last book *The Great Evangelical Disaster*. Ten years prior, the book and video series *How Should We Then Live?* had left us with less of a program than a warning. The title comes from Ezekiel's lament: How on earth do you expect to survive this? There is a warning that the island of even very imperfect peace, love, and joy in our culture, once the product of biblical teaching,

was rapidly sinking under the rising flood of mere personal interests, irrational religions, and greed (for the sake of economic security). Schaeffer saw that the objective truth of historic Christianity had been largely abandoned. The search is now for a personal history, a private relation to my friend Jesus, and a justification for personal authority without foundation in truth. As Schaeffer would often remark, the church has once again adopted the dominant mentality and themes of the world around her.

Most efforts to lift personal self-esteem without a corresponding intellectual and spiritual growth are lethal. They shroud all certainty of real salvation with a cloak of good feelings and highly-stimulating personal (i.e., private) experiences. They present no real challenge, only a variation, to the surrounding pagan culture of tribal pluralism, personal rights, and uncritical consumption. A personal faith, in contrast to what the Bible explains about one person, the creature, believing another, the Father of Jesus Christ, is like an open barrel into which all kinds of "personal" feelings, preferences, viewpoints, and reactions can be put. "Personal" has taken on the meaning of "private" in our multi-cultural and pluralistic world. "Personal" originally established the contrast between the animal and the machine. Today it means autonomy, as in personal rights; then it meant obedience, responsibility, and devotion, which only persons can choose. Now it produces a cynical individualism.

Schaeffer's interest in ideas was not a naked intellectualism. He depended on scholarly work, but had little interest in scholastic arguments. He wanted to help and convince people, not win points. He had no system of apologetics, not any

number of easy steps for complicated people. He was, however, able to make God and his truth plausible to people whose life pinched them like an ill-fitting shoe in many areas and drove them to ask questions about any area of reality. To us he gave a view that opened up the valleys and mountains of the biblical landscape. He spoke about this in terms of a language that communicated real truth, with words that related to God and man. This was no "language of grace," but a certain grammar, which gave to all parts of reality a proper place and relationship. Christians were thereby not given some strange "eyes of faith," but they could now see why it was good and right and reasonable to believe God.

It has often been remarked that Schaeffer was not a great scholar. In the technical sense this is admittedly true. He was interested, like many generalists, to see the relationships between various parts, to give the lay of the land within the body of oceans. There are many others who have built off his initial propositions and encouragement. They are now a loud confirmation of Schaeffer's profound and accurate analysis. He wanted it to be this way. He sought no clones, but people who would find for themselves marvels of insight and then run with what has been entrusted to them from the Lord. What I am glad about is the degree to which scholars from many religious and intellectual roots have come to agree with, or at least silently support, Schaeffer's original findings about the power of biblical ideas to shape thoughts and lives of individual people and cultures. Whether you read Michael Novak or David Wells or the historian John Roberts, whether you wonder about the collapse of Soviet Marxism or Islam's conflict with us, whether

you visit the Metropolitan Museum in New York or read the art historian Hans Rookmaker, you will find an acknowledgment of the fundamental truthfulness of Schaeffer's somewhat sketchy, but no less accurate understanding of the uniqueness of Christianity.

People may not yet be ready to believe in Christ, God, and the Bible, but they all confess that our high view of man and work, law and freedom, private property and social responsibility, enterprise and science and art is impossible to understand except on this basis: People once believed and taught that the Bible is true. It is true from God and true for man in the circle of reality, the real world. Francis Schaeffer was one who brought all this back into the thinking of the church when she had long been hammered by doubt, insecurity, and petty squabbles over denominational territory.

Schaeffer valued people's thoughts and minds because he saw therein our distinguishing mark as those who were made in the image of the eternal person of God. As God thought, spoke, and created, showed his emotions, and worked out his plans, so also was man, male and female, a thinking, feeling, and creative being. In these areas a relationship based on real comprehension is possible, which should then expand to a reality of love and obedience, of adoration and wonder when the creature can stand and work before the creator in awe. Schaeffer reminded us that we should then get on with life, eternally.